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AUTHOR Anderson, W. Steve
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ABSTRACT

Faithfully following a fixed set of procedures has long been standard practice in writing resumes. This process produces a passable document with a minimum of effort expended. There are, however, advantages to be gained from taking a conceptual approach to resume preparation. First, it can help provide a framework for these procedures, giving the writer an understanding of the process that allows better control over the final product. Second, since no set of procedures can cover every contingency, the conceptual approach provides help when the situation is vague or ambiguous. A conceptual model can be devised based on J. Kinneavy's formulation of the rhetorical triangle, which states that basic to all uses of language are a person who encodes a message, the signal or language that carries the message, the reality to which the message refers, and the decoder or receiver of the message. In the case of the job search, the encoder or job applicant is an outsider and the decoder or personnel officer an insider. Each has a different perception of the reality being dealt with in the search. This situation can be used by the applicant to help evaluate material for inclusion in the resume. Insiders have control over the description of the type of person they are seeking, but they have little control over how outsiders style themselves to fit that description. The applicants are, largely, what they say they are; that is, the readers of resumes know only what they are told. Outsiders should use this opportunity to make themselves appear to be insiders. (RBW)

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The Rhetoric of the Resume

W. Steve Anderson

In the many presentations of resume writing that I have reviewed, one feature stands out: an emphasis on practice over principle. Emphasis on practice is understandable. When you want a resume fast, a set of practices--a passed down folklore of DOs and DON'Ts--will deliver the goods, even if not the best merchandise.

Still, I'm a little surprised that we haven't taken greater advantage of the considerable advances in composition theory and research when teaching some of the more " mundane" writing tasks, the resume being one of them (mundane, that is, until you go after that special job).

I don't wish to overload with theory something as functional and unashamedly practical as a resume. Nor do I wish to suggest that we should abandon giving students a shrewd set of practices for preparing resumes. I do want to suggest, though, that there are advantages to a conceptual approach. It can provide a framework for understanding the shrewd practices, and understanding leads to greater control over the document--which is always to our advantage. Furthermore, no set of practices could ever cover every contingency; a conceptual approach helps us interpret specific instances in which the practice is vague, ambiguous, or non-existent.

I will build my conceptual model for the resume on the basic paradigm of written communication. You are familiar with that paradigm, sometimes called the rhetorical triangle, in one way

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or another. I will introduce it and review it as it has been formulated by James L. Kinneavy in A Theory of Discourse (1980), which I consider one of the more comprehensive presentations.

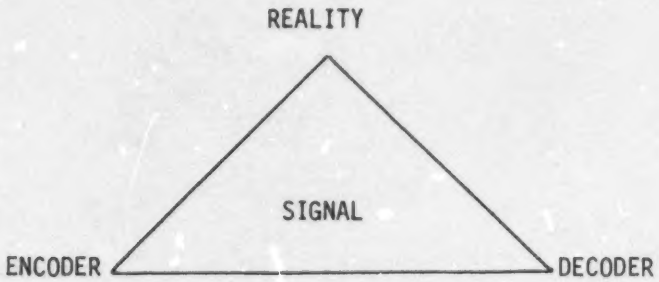

ILLUSTRATION #1

As you see in the illustration, Encoder takes one corner, Decoder another, and Reality the third. What Kinneavy calls the Signal resides in the middle. To quote Kinneavy, "Basic to all uses of language are a person who encodes a message, the signal (language) which carries the message, the reality to which the message refers, and the decoder (receiver of the message)" (p. 19).

There are, of course, many other formulations of the rhetorical triangle, but I want to stick with Kinneavy's formulation because I think encode and decode are especially useful terms. The overall model itself reminds our students that they have an audience to deal with--an awareness that rarely comes automatically. But Kinneavy's specific terms,

encode/decode, remind our students (and us) that the selection (and deselection) of data is involved and intricate.

The basic model allows us to do some obvious sorting out of the situation in which we are trying to communicate. In the case of a resume, somebody looking for a job is trying to connect with an employer by means of a resume. Of course, we could have made that observation without the rhetorical triangle. But it starts to become a bit more useful when we assign values for some of the corners. For example, the encoder is also an outsider. And the decoder, our audience, is an insider. These spatial values are more than casual, something that anybody who has ever done serious job searching knows. When you're looking for a job, you are outside trying to get inside. And those who have worked at hiring know (or at least feel) that they are inside, both emotionally and spatially. When we screen resumes, don't we look for traits that mark the applicant as one who belongs inside with us?

So I offer this elaboration on the model:

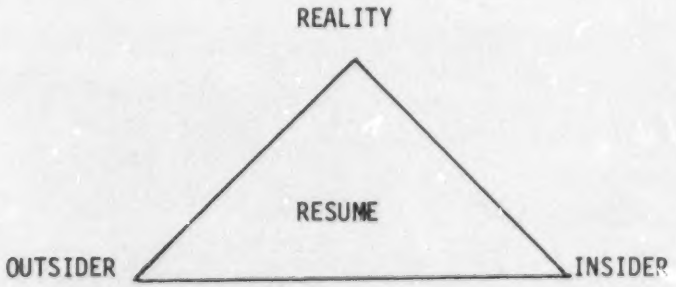

ILLUSTRATION #2

The resulting dichotomy, inside/outside, has useful implications. It provides a means of evaluating the information that we consider for inclusion in the resume.

But the triangle does more than allow us to balance out the relationship of encoder and decoder. In addition to reminding us that we are drawing on reality for data (if we need reminding), it allows us to diagram neatly the split reality that we are dealing with. Reality in these circumstances has a front and a back. There is a reality from the outsider's point of view and a reality from the insider's point of view.

Thus we have another elaboration on the model:

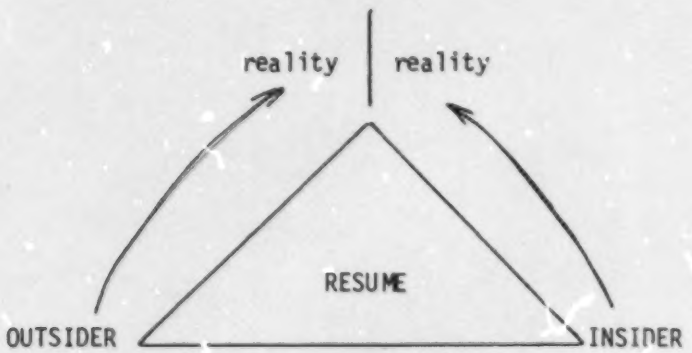

ILLUSTRATION #3

I think we can draw some useful implications from this split reality. Although the insiders have control over the description of what they want (their "reality"), they don't have direct control over how the outsiders style themselves (or present their "reality") to fit that description. You are, largely, what you say you are. You are an outsider to the company, but you are an insider to yourself. The company is the

insider on what it wants, but it is an outsider on knowing you. The audience knows only what you tell it. In short, the outsiders have the opportunity to make themselves insiders. The "smart" outsider will take full advantage of this opportunity. I do not consider such advice to students as cynical.

We could consider yet one more elaboration on the diagram, although I am coming dangerous close to parody:

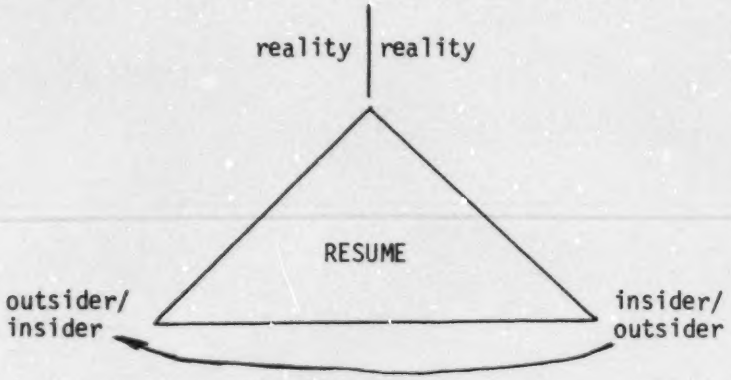

ILLUSTRATION #4

Of course, there is an aspect of the process that the employers (and their screeners) control: their own idea of the kind of person they want to hire. I think that there is a built-in ambiguity in what employers look for, but it is an ambiguity that the job-seeker can readily exploit. Companies want their employees to be "normal" and yet they want them to be "exceptional." They want people who "fit in" yet "stand out." They want our genius, but they want us to keep it under control. We might see this as an inevitable ambiguity in any institution in which the old must be preserved while the new is ushered in. I assume that successful companies must do both.

I won't pretend to resolve that ambiguity, but I will suggest that there are ways for resume writers to circumvent the problem that it might cause them in the job search. The requirement to be normal usually pertains to the personal data that goes into a resume: age, sex, physical and health information, race, marital status, and so on. Specific quantities in these categories are often--too often--translated into stereotypical images. For example, the quantity 7' 2" is out of the "normal" profile, and easily translates into "too tall." Obviously, other quantities translate into too old, too short, too fat, too sick, over-qualified, and so on. These quantities, as physical facts (as "reality"), are either difficult or impossible to control, but our presentation of them <u>is</u> under control. The resume writer should beware of the impact of such data. Certain facts, of course, will eventually be known. However, that doesn't mean that we have to volunteer those "facts" until we've gotten an interview. Those facts will at that time speak for themselves, but so will another important fact--the applicant's ability to do the job.

I have known people who simply omit personal information altogether--except for name and address (of course, even these could cause you trouble). I wouldn't advise this practice for a couple of reasons. First, the screener becomes too readily suspicious that the application is "hiding something." But, in addition, when we omit too much personal information, we remain strangers to the reader--we remain outside. It is the personal

data that helps in giving the impression that a real person, a potential insider, has written the resume.

The "exceptional" requirement can be satisfied by achievements. We can present ourselves as ordinary people who have done extraordinary things. Most anybody can present such an image, and do it truthfully. Most human endeavors can be interpreted as competitive. So we must focus on those competitive occasions when we have done better than "average."

Some examples:

AWARDS: A student once asked me about using in her resume an award she received for having the highest grade point of all sophomore women majoring in physical education. The student didn't think it counted for much because: 1.) it was only worth $25.00, and 2.) only two other sophomores were majoring in P.E. Her "inside" knowledge was that the award wasn't worth very much. But as an "outsider" I saw the award as unmistakeable evidence of excellence. True, there were only two other contestants, but she was the <u>best</u> of the three! She was in the upper one-third--not bad in any competition. Since it was the only award she had ever won (at least she couldn't think of any others) I advised her to use it.

On the other hand, I had another student who had won a "minor" award, but had won numerous "major" awards as well. I advised her not to use the "minor" award if it threatened to crowd out more impressive ones. She had the luxury of throwing out a thing or two.

GRADE POINT: Students often ask me if they should include their grade point average in a resume. I tell them to use it if it can be decoded as a measure of excellence. On a 4.0 scale, anything below 3.0 is easily translated as C+, at best. I think there is some risk in including a grade point that is below 3.0. However, there are numerous ways to isolate and focus the grade point. One student had an overall grade point below 3.00; unfortunately, his grade point in his major was also "just average." On the other hand, he had a 3.75 in his four accounting courses, and he had a 3.25 during his senior year. I told him to use those figures. He was concerned that to do so would be "cheating". But it isn't cheating if you clearly indicate what you are measuring.

HOBBIES: Students often list hobbies merely for the sake of doing so. Because they see resume examples that include hobbies, they feel that they also should include them. But students should consider the impact that entries on hobbies are likely to have on a screener. Before a student tells somebody that raising snakes is his hobby, he might consider how a stranger might react. If the hobby fits the criteria of "fit in" and "stand out," then it should be used. But do not be too eager to include a personal revelation that, on paper, will reveal you as "odd."

MILITARY: As your own insider, you know that you just sat there for two or three years. But note that no matter how much you hated the Army (or Navy, or Air Force) military service is

evidence that you survived a rigorously structured experience. And few screeners could hold against you the fact that you "served your country."

So much for examples. I think most any other of the traditional items of inclusion could be evaluated similarly.

But the elaborated triangle isn't the end of model building possibilities. Wayne Booth's "The Rhetorical Stance" (1963) gives us one more way to use the rhetorical triangle in the service of the resume. He reminds us that the three corners of the triangle must be balanced in order to produce the appropriate document. Adopting that principle, we might observe that a resume that over-emphasizes "facts" neither reveals the special character of the encoder nor focuses the material for the decoder; over-emphasis on the personality of the encoder could sound self-indulgent; and over-emphasis on the role of the audience may smack of sycophancy. But we haven't the time to explore the details here.

W. Steve Anderson
University of Arkansas at
Little Rock

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